

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

APPLICATION FOR LETTERS PATENT

**Method and Apparatus for Handling Policies  
In an Enterprise**

Inventors:

Ashvinkumar J. Sanghvi

Howard M. Hance

Lev Novik

Fred E. Shaudys

ATTORNEY'S DOCKET NO. MS1-689US

1 **RELATED APPLICATIONS**

2 This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No.  
3 60/210,347, filed June 7, 2000.  
4

5 **TECHNICAL FIELD**

6 The present invention relates to computing systems and, more particularly,  
7 to the handling of events generated by components, services and applications in a  
8 computing environment.  
9

10 **BACKGROUND**

11 Computer systems, such as servers and desktop personal computers, are  
12 expected to operate without constant monitoring. These computer systems  
13 typically perform various tasks without the user's knowledge. When performing  
14 these tasks, the computer system often encounters events that require a particular  
15 action (such as logging the event, generating an alert for a particular system or  
16 application, or performing an action in response to the event). Various  
17 mechanisms are available to handle these events.

18 A computing enterprise typically includes one or more networks, services,  
19 and systems that exchange data and other information with one another. The  
20 enterprise may include one or more security mechanisms to safeguard data and  
21 authenticate users and may utilize one or more different data transmission  
22 protocols. At any particular time, one or more networks, services or systems may  
23 be down (e.g., powered down or disconnected from one or more networks).  
24 Networks, services or systems can be down for scheduled maintenance, upgrades,  
25

1 overload or failure. Application programs attempting to obtain event data must  
2 contend with the various networks, services, and systems in the enterprise when  
3 they are down. Additionally, application programs must contend with the security  
4 and network topology limitations of the enterprise as well as the various protocols  
5 used in the enterprise.

6 Existing operating system components, services, and applications generate  
7 events having a variety of different formats. Typically, the events are stored in  
8 different files or databases (e.g., a file or database on the local system). These  
9 stored events are accessed via different application programs using different  
10 application programming interfaces (APIs). Thus, to retrieve event data in this  
11 type of system, an application program must know where to locate the stored event  
12 data and how to read or “decode” the particular event data. Each time a new type  
13 of event (e.g., having a new storage location, a new format, and/or a new API) is  
14 introduced, each application program that desires the new event data must be  
15 adapted to locate and retrieve the new event data.

16 The systems and methods described herein address these limitations by  
17 providing a centralized mechanism for collecting and storing event data. The  
18 system and method also provide a uniform event-handling process and  
19 infrastructure.  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

## SUMMARY

The event-handling systems and methods described herein provide a centralized architecture and procedure for managing event data. The centralized handling of event data uses a common interface to access event data, regardless of the event source, event data format, network topology or security mechanisms contained in the enterprise. Additional event sources can be added to the enterprise without requiring changes to the event-handling system. The event-handling system is also capable of merging together multiple policies into a single merged policy set.

In one embodiment, the system identifies multiple policies to be combined together and determines whether any conflicts exist between the multiple policies. Non-conflicting policies are included in a merged policy set. Conflicting policies are resolved by selecting a preferred policy and including the preferred policy in the merged policy set.

In a described embodiment, the preferred policy is selected by arranging conflicting policy templates in order from global policies to local policies and determining the intersection of the conflicting policy templates. The preferred policy template is selected based on the policy template closest to the local policies and within the intersection of the conflicting policy templates.

In a described implementation, the policies identify the types of events that are provided to each device.

In one embodiment, resolving conflicting policies includes comparing related policies individually.

## **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

Fig. 1 illustrates a block diagram of a system that receives event information from multiple event providers and provides event information to multiple event consumers.

Fig. 2 illustrates a block diagram of a system that receives events and logs those events to an event log.

Fig. 3 is a flow diagram illustrating an event-handling procedure.

Fig. 4 illustrates an environment in which multiple systems are arranged into three different groupings, all of which are coupled to an event log.

Fig. 5 is a flow diagram illustrating a procedure for establishing and managing groupings of computer systems.

Fig. 6 illustrates the combining of multiple policies into a single merged policy set.

Fig. 7 is a flow diagram illustrating a procedure for generating a merged policy set from multiple policies.

Fig. 8 illustrates an arrangement of multiple policy templates having partially overlapping policy elements.

Fig. 9 illustrates an example of a suitable operating environment in which the event-handling system and method may be implemented.

## **DETAILED DESCRIPTION**

The systems and methods described herein provide for the centralized handling of event data generated by various event sources in an enterprise. The use of a common data format, a centralized event data storage device, and a common interface to obtain event data improves access to the event data and reduces administrative tasks associated with the handling of event data generated throughout the enterprise. The same event data format is used regardless of the source of the event data (also referred to as an event provider) or the users of the event data (also referred to as an event consumer). As the systems, applications, and topology of the enterprise changes, the event data format remains unchanged.

Web-Based Enterprise Management (WBEM) provides uniform access to management information throughout an enterprise. WBEM is an industry initiative to develop technology for accessing management information in an enterprise environment. This management information includes, for example, information on the state of system memory, inventories of currently installed client applications, and other information related to the status of the system. A particular embodiment of the event-handling system is implemented using Windows Management Instrumentation (WMI) developed by Microsoft Corporation of Redmond, Washington, which provides an infrastructure to handle various events generated by event sources throughout an enterprise. WMI is Microsoft Corporation's implementation of WBEM.

WMI technology enables systems, applications, networks, and other managed components to be represented using the Common Information Model (CIM) designed by the Distributed Management Task Force (DMTF). CIM is an

1 extensible data model for representing objects that exist in typical management  
2 environments. CIM is able to model anything in the managed environment,  
3 regardless of the location of the data source. The Managed Object Format (MOF)  
4 language is used to define and store modeled data. In addition to data modeling,  
5 WMI provides a set of base services that include query-based information retrieval  
6 and event notification. Access to these services and to the management data is  
7 provided through a single programming interface.

8 WMI classes define the basic units of management. Each WMI class is a  
9 template for a type of managed object. For example, Win32\_DiskDrive is a model  
10 representing a physical disk drive. For each physical disk drive that exists, there is  
11 an instance of the Win32\_DiskDrive class. WMI classes may contain properties,  
12 which describe the data of the class and methods, which describe the behavior of  
13 the class.

14 WMI classes describe managed objects that are independent of a particular  
15 implementation or technology. WMI includes an eventing subsystem that follows  
16 the publish-subscribe model, in which an event consumer subscribes for a  
17 selection of events (generated by one or more event providers) and performs an  
18 action as a result of receiving the event. WMI also provides a centralized  
19 mechanism for collecting and storing event data. This stored event data is  
20 accessible by other systems via WMI tools and/or application programming  
21 interfaces (APIs).

22 Although particular embodiments are discussed herein as using WMI,  
23 alternate embodiments may utilize any enterprise management system or  
24 application, whether web-based or otherwise. The event providers and event  
25

1 consumers discussed herein are selected for purposes of explanation. The  
2 teachings of the present invention can be used with any type of event provider and  
3 any type of event consumer. Additionally, the event-handling system and method  
4 described herein can be applied to any type of enterprise or other arrangement of  
5 computing devices, applications, and/or networks.

6 Fig. 1 illustrates a block diagram of a system 100 that receives event  
7 information from multiple event providers 108 (i.e., event sources) and provides  
8 event information to multiple event consumers 102 (i.e., the users of the event  
9 data). System 100 includes a WMI module 106, which receives event data from  
10 multiple event sources 108 and receives requests for information (e.g., notification  
11 of particular events) from multiple event consumers 102. Event sources 108 may  
12 include, for example, managed nodes or managed systems in a network. The  
13 multiple event sources are identified as event providers 110. The multiple event  
14 consumers are identified as applications 104.

15 WMI module 106 shown in Fig. 1 represents the managed node layer of the  
16 WMI module. As discussed below, the WMI module 106 may also include a  
17 central store layer, which may include user interface functionality. The different  
18 layers of WMI module 106 manage different types of activities and/or perform  
19 different types of functions.

20 Event providers 110 include, for example, systems, services or applications  
21 that generate event data. An exemplary event provider is a disk drive (or an  
22 application that monitors the status of a disk drive). The disk drive may generate  
23 an event indicating the available storage capacity on the disk drive or indicating  
24 the amount of data currently stored on the disk drive. The disk drive may also  
25



1 generate an event indicating that the disk drive is nearly full of data (e.g., when  
2 ninety-five percent or more of the disk drive's capacity is used).

3 Event consumers 102 may request to be notified of certain events (also  
4 referred to as "subscribing" to an event). An example event consumer is an  
5 application that manages multiple storage devices in an enterprise. The  
6 application may request to receive events generated by any of the disk drives or  
7 other storage devices in the enterprise. The application can use this event  
8 information to distribute storage tasks among the multiple storage devices based  
9 on the available capacity of each device and/or the quantity of read or write  
10 requests received by each storage device.

11 Fig. 2 illustrates a block diagram of a system 150 that receives events and  
12 logs those events to an event log. System 150 includes a central store layer of  
13 WMI module 106, which is coupled to multiple user interface (UI) applications  
14 152. UI applications 152 are used to access WMI module 106 to retrieve data,  
15 manage systems, and configure various enterprise management parameters. The  
16 central store layer of WMI module 106 provides for the centralized logging and  
17 storage of event data received from various nodes and various networks in an  
18 enterprise. WMI module 106 is also coupled to receive events 162 from one or  
19 more event sources. For example, events may be received from the managed node  
20 layer of WMI module 106, discussed above with respect to Fig. 1, from an event  
21 forwarding application (e.g., application 104), or from one or more event  
22 providers (e.g., event provider 110).

23 System 150 also includes a set of policies 160, which are accessible by  
24 WMI module 106. Policies 160 may control the configuration of one or more  
25

1 systems in the enterprise. Other policies may define various activities, such as  
 2 event filtering, event correlation, and the forwarding of events to particular  
 3 devices or applications. A database 156 is coupled to WMI module 106. Database  
 4 156 stores various information related to the enterprise. For example, database  
 5 156 can store event data (i.e., creating an event log), policy data, and enterprise  
 6 configuration information.

7 WMI module 106 is also coupled to an event log 158. The event log 158  
 8 uses WMI features to provide a distributed architecture that is capable of selecting,  
 9 filtering, correlating, forwarding, storing, and delivering event data in an  
 10 enterprise. The event log 158 allows users, such as administrators, to request data  
 11 related to a particular event, request data from a particular node or device in the  
 12 enterprise, define the manner in which events are correlated with one another,  
 13 define how certain events should be forwarded, and define how to store event data.  
 14 Data requests may be accessed from the event log 158 using, for example, a  
 15 particular UI application 152. The event log 158 uses an event provider model  
 16 that allows an application, device or driver to generate events.

17 The event log 158 provides a policy-based administration of the enterprise.  
 18 The policy infrastructure allows administrators to set a policy in the Directory  
 19 Service (DS) and the event log ensures that the proper set of WMI objects (e.g.,  
 20 filters, bindings, correlators, consumers, and configuration objects) are delivered  
 21 to the proper devices or applications in the enterprise.

22 Table 1 below identifies various types of event providers available in a  
 23 particular embodiment. Additionally, the table includes a description of the events  
 24 generated by each event provider. For example, the Win32 Provider generates  
 25 events that include information related to the operating system, computer system,

peripheral devices, file systems, and security for a particular device (such as a computer system) in the enterprise.

TABLE 1

Event Provider	Description of Events Provided
Win32 Provider	Supplies information about the operating system, computer system, peripheral devices, file systems, and security.
WDM Provider	Supplies low-level Windows Driver Model (WDM) information for user input devices, storage devices, network interfaces, and communications ports.
Event Log Provider	Allows the reading of Windows NT event log entries, controls the configuration of event log administrative options, and event log backup.
Registry Provider	Allows registry keys to be created, read, and written. WMI events can be generated when specified Registry keys are modified.
Performance Counter Provider	Exposes the raw performance counter information used to compute various performance values.
Active Directory Provider	Acts as a gateway to information stored in Microsoft Active Directory services. Allows information from both WMI and Active Directory to be accessed using a single API.
Windows Installer Provider	Supplies information about applications installed with the Windows Installer.
SNMP Provider	Acts as a gateway to systems and devices that use SNMP for management. Allows SNMP traps to be automatically mapped to WMI events.

Fig. 3 is a flow diagram illustrating an event-handling procedure 200. The WMI module monitors event activity throughout the enterprise (block 202). The procedure 200 determines whether event data has been received from an event provider (block 204). If event data has been received, the WMI module records the event data and initiates any appropriate actions (block 206). An appropriate action includes notifying an event consumer of the event (e.g., if the event consumer previously subscribed to such an event).

At block 208, the procedure 200 determines whether a new subscription for event information has been received. The procedure 200 may also determine whether a request to revise an existing subscription has been received. If a new subscription (or a revised subscription) is received, the procedure continues to block 210 where the WMI module retrieves the requested event information and provides the information to the requesting event customer. Alternatively, the procedure may log the subscription request and notify the requesting event consumer when the next event is received that qualifies under the consumer's subscription request.

The WMI module allows multiple systems in an enterprise to be grouped together such that various event policies are assigned to the group of systems, rather than assigning the same set of policies to each individual system. This grouping of systems simplifies the administrative task of assigning event policies to systems within the enterprise.

Fig. 4 illustrates an environment 300 in which multiple systems are arranged into three different groupings, all of which are coupled to an event log. The grouping of systems is rule-based depending both on the organization of the enterprise and the properties of the various systems in the enterprise. Additionally,

1 the grouping of systems may be based on the current state and configuration of the  
2 systems in the enterprise. Example groups may include all computer systems  
3 running a particular version of an operating system, all systems located in a  
4 particular geographic region (e.g., Europe), and all systems that have more than  
5 500 Megabytes of free disk space.

6 The rule-based grouping of systems simplifies the administrative tasks by  
7 not requiring the manual maintenance of lists identifying the current configuration  
8 and current state of each system in the enterprise. The current state of each system  
9 is evaluated before each policy is applied, thereby reducing the likelihood that  
10 previously determined state information is no longer valid. As systems enter and  
11 leave the enterprise or change configuration, the correct policies are applied to the  
12 systems regardless of these ongoing changes to the enterprise.

13 Environment 300 in Fig. 4 includes three separate groupings 302, 304, and  
14 306. Each grouping 302-306 is coupled to event log 308, which maintains and  
15 evaluates the state and configuration information of the systems in environment  
16 300. Group 302 includes five systems, group 304 includes two systems, and group  
17 306 includes two systems, one of which is also included in group 302. Thus, a  
18 particular system may be located in two or more groups.

19 As mentioned above, the grouping of systems is used to simplify the  
20 assignment of policies by assigning similar policies to the group instead of  
21 assigning the same policies to each individual system. Additionally, this grouping  
22 of systems simplifies the management of the system by allowing the administrator  
23 to work with fewer groups instead of a larger number of individual systems, many  
24 of which have redundant policies.

Fig. 5 is a flow diagram illustrating a procedure 400 for establishing and managing groupings of computer systems. Initially, the administrator of the enterprise (or a portion of the enterprise) defines one or more groups (block 402). Next, the administrator assigns policies to each defined group (block 404). Each system in the group becomes associated with the assigned policies, in the same manner as if the policies were separately assigned to each of the individual systems. Block 406 determines whether a particular system is a member of one or more groups. In one implementation, this determination is performed at policy-evaluation time (i.e., when policies are applied to one or more systems in the enterprise). A particular system may be a member of a group at one instance, but not a member of the same group at a different time. For example, if a group includes all systems that have a modem installed, a system that was previously a member of the group will not be a member if the modem is removed from the system. Since the group membership is determined at policy-evaluation time, a particular system may be removed from a group without any action on the part of the administrator or other user.

At block 408, the procedure 400 determines whether a new group has been defined. If a new group has been defined, then the administrator assigns policies to the new group (block 410). The procedure then returns to block 406 to determine whether a particular system is a member of the new group as well as other existing groups. Administrators (or other users) may generate new policies and apply those new policies to particular systems and/or groups of systems. New policies that are applied to a group are automatically applied to all systems in the group.

1 In a particular embodiment, systems in an enterprise are grouped according  
2 to the department or organization division with which they are associated. For  
3 example, one group of systems may be associated with the production department,  
4 another group associated with the marketing department, and a third group  
5 associated with the customer service department. Each department may have  
6 different needs with respect to their policies, but the systems within a particular  
7 department are likely to have many policies in common. For example, an  
8 accounting department may have stricter security requirements and, therefore,  
9 require a different set of policies.

10 Fig. 6 illustrates the combining of multiple policies 502, 504, 506, and 508  
11 into a single merged policy set 510. Event log 512 communicates with the merged  
12 policy set 510. This merging of policies allows several policies to be merged  
13 together into a single policy. In a particular implementation, policies are applied  
14 by administrators and stored in a central location. The appropriate policies for a  
15 particular system are selected, ordered, merged and applied by the WMI module.  
16 When the policy is applied, the desired event filters and bindings are created at the  
17 appropriate systems throughout the enterprise.

18 The policy elements that are complementary with one another are appended  
19 to the new, merged policy set 510. If two or more policy elements are in conflict  
20 with one another, then the conflict is resolved by applying a conflict-resolution  
21 algorithm, discussed below.

22 Fig. 7 is a flow diagram illustrating a procedure 600 for generating a  
23 merged policy set from multiple policies. Initially, the procedure 600 identifies  
24 multiple policies to be merged together and compares related policies individually  
25 (block 602). Next, the procedure determines whether the policies being compared

are in conflict with one another (block 604). If the policies are not in conflict with one another, the non-conflicting policies are added to the merged policy set (block 606). However, if the policies are conflicting, the procedure continues to block 608 where the conflicting policy templates are arranged in order from global policies to local policies. The procedure 600 then determines the intersection of the multiple policy templates (block 610) and selects a preferred policy template (block 612). If additional policies remain to be evaluated, the procedure returns to block 604. Otherwise, the procedure ends after evaluating all policies.

Fig. 8 illustrates an arrangement 700 of multiple policy templates having partially overlapping policy elements. Each policy template includes multiple properties. One property represents an “allowable range” for the policy and another property represents a “preferred value” for the policy. These property values will affect the outcome of the application of the policy, which, in turn, causes the creation of event filters, bindings, and other activities to apply the policy throughout the enterprise.

The arrangement 700 is used to eliminate conflicts between multiple policies being merged into a single policy set. As mentioned above with respect to block 608 in Fig. 7, the policy templates are arranged from global policy templates (e.g., policies that define the broad configuration and operation objectives for the entire enterprise) at the top of Fig. 8 to local policy templates (e.g., policies that are specific to a particular device or application) at the bottom of Fig. 8. For example, a global policy template 702 may be created or defined by one or more administrators that are responsible for administering the entire enterprise. A local policy template 712 may be created or defined by an administrator that is responsible for a particular portion of an enterprise, such as a particular group of



1 systems or systems in a specific location. Additional policy templates 704, 706,  
2 708, and 710 each contain varying levels of policies ranging from nearly global  
3 policies (policy template 704) to nearly local policies (policy template 710).

4 After the policy templates are arranged as shown in Fig. 8, it is necessary to  
5 find the intersection of all policy templates. In the example of Fig. 8, the  
6 intersection of five of the policy templates is shown by the two broken lines 714  
7 and 716. This intersection of five policy templates defines an “allowed range” that  
8 satisfies the majority of policy templates. Note that policy template 708 is  
9 discarded because the policies are in conflict with (e.g., opposed to) the policy  
10 range defined by the intersection of the other five policy templates 702, 704, 706,  
11 710, and 712. Within each policy template 702, 704, 706, 708, 710 and 712, is a  
12 preferred range or preferred value 720 (identified by a “P” surrounded by a box)  
13 associated with the policy template.

14 Finally, a “preferred range” is selected. The preferred range (or preferred  
15 policy) has all properties set to preferred properties. Each preferred property is a  
16 preferred policy from the policy closest to the system (i.e., the bottom of Fig. 8)  
17 and still within the “allowed range”. In the example of Fig. 8, the preferred range  
18 for the merged policy template is the preferred range associated with policy  
19 template 710, because it is the preferred range closest to the system that is also  
20 within the allowed range. The preferred range associated with policy template 712  
21 is not selected because that preferred range is not within the allowed range.

22 The conflict resolution procedure discussed above achieves customization  
23 of the policies on a particular system based on the preferences of the administrator  
24 closest to the system (i.e., the administrator most knowledgeable about the system  
25

1 and responsible for the system) while staying within the policy ranges dictated by  
2 all administrators with a higher level of authority.

3 The following are example policy templates:

4 Policy template 1:

5 Policy type: policy forwarding  
6 Destination range: Sys-red, Sys-blue, Sys-green  
7 Destination preferred: Sys-blue

8 Policy template 2:

9 Policy type: policy forwarding  
10 Destination range: Sys-red, Sys-blue  
11 Destination preferred: Sys-red

12 In this example, Policy template 1 is set at a global level and Policy template 2 is  
13 set at a local level. When the two policy templates are merged, the resulting  
14 merged template is:

15 Policy template Merged:

16 Policy type: policy forwarding  
17 Destination range: Sys-red, Sys-blue, Sys-green  
18 Destination preferred: Sys-red

19 Thus, the preferred range or value is selected from the lowest (most local) possible  
20 level. In this case, the preferred range of the merged policy template is the  
21 preferred range of the local policy template (Sys-red).

22 Fig. 9 illustrates an example of a suitable operating environment in which  
23 the event handling mechanism described herein may be implemented. The  
24 illustrated operating environment is only one example of a suitable operating  
25 environment and is not intended to suggest any limitation as to the scope of use or

1 functionality of the invention. Other well-known computing systems,  
2 environments, and/or configurations that may be suitable for use with the  
3 invention include, but are not limited to, personal computers, server computers,  
4 hand-held or laptop devices, multiprocessor systems, microprocessor-based  
5 systems, programmable consumer electronics, gaming consoles, cellular  
6 telephones, network PCs, minicomputers, mainframe computers, distributed  
7 computing environments that include any of the above systems or devices, and the  
8 like.

9 Fig. 9 shows a general example of a computer 842 that can be used in  
10 accordance with the invention. Computer 842 is shown as an example of a  
11 computer that can perform the various functions described herein. Computer 842  
12 includes one or more processors or processing units 844, a system memory 846,  
13 and a bus 848 that couples various system components including the system  
14 memory 846 to processors 844.

15 The bus 848 represents one or more of any of several types of bus  
16 structures, including a memory bus or memory controller, a peripheral bus, an  
17 accelerated graphics port, and a processor or local bus using any of a variety of  
18 bus architectures. The system memory 846 includes read only memory (ROM)  
19 850 and random access memory (RAM) 852. A basic input/output system (BIOS)  
20 854, containing the basic routines that help to transfer information between  
21 elements within computer 842, such as during start-up, is stored in ROM 850.  
22 Computer 842 further includes a hard disk drive 856 for reading from and writing  
23 to a hard disk, not shown, connected to bus 848 via a hard disk drive interface 857  
24 (e.g., a SCSI, ATA, or other type of interface); a magnetic disk drive 858 for  
25 reading from and writing to a removable magnetic disk 860, connected to bus 848

1 via a magnetic disk drive interface 861; and an optical disk drive 862 for reading  
2 from and/or writing to a removable optical disk 864 such as a CD ROM, DVD, or  
3 other optical media, connected to bus 848 via an optical drive interface 865. The  
4 drives and their associated computer-readable media provide nonvolatile storage  
5 of computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules and other data  
6 for computer 842. Although the exemplary environment described herein employs  
7 a hard disk, a removable magnetic disk 860 and a removable optical disk 864, it  
8 will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that other types of computer readable  
9 media which can store data that is accessible by a computer, such as magnetic  
10 cassettes, flash memory cards, random access memories (RAMs), read only  
11 memories (ROM), and the like, may also be used in the exemplary operating  
12 environment.

13 A number of program modules may be stored on the hard disk, magnetic  
14 disk 860, optical disk 864, ROM 850, or RAM 852, including an operating system  
15 870, one or more application programs 872, other program modules 874, and  
16 program data 876. A user may enter commands and information into computer  
17 842 through input devices such as keyboard 878 and pointing device 880. Other  
18 input devices (not shown) may include a microphone, joystick, game pad, satellite  
19 dish, scanner, or the like. These and other input devices are connected to the  
20 processing unit 844 through an interface 868 that is coupled to the system bus  
21 (e.g., a serial port interface, a parallel port interface, a universal serial bus (USB)  
22 interface, etc.). A monitor 884 or other type of display device is also connected to  
23 the system bus 848 via an interface, such as a video adapter 886. In addition to the  
24 monitor, personal computers typically include other peripheral output devices (not  
25 shown) such as speakers and printers.

Computer 842 operates in a networked environment using logical connections to one or more remote computers, such as a remote computer 888. The remote computer 888 may be another personal computer, a server, a router, a network PC, a peer device or other common network node, and typically includes many or all of the elements described above relative to computer 842, although only a memory storage device 890 has been illustrated in Fig. 9. The logical connections depicted in Fig. 9 include a local area network (LAN) 892 and a wide area network (WAN) 894. Such networking environments are commonplace in offices, enterprise-wide computer networks, intranets, and the Internet. In certain embodiments, computer 842 executes an Internet Web browser program (which may optionally be integrated into the operating system 870) such as the "Internet Explorer" Web browser manufactured and distributed by Microsoft Corporation of Redmond, Washington.

When used in a LAN networking environment, computer 842 is connected to the local network 892 through a network interface or adapter 896. When used in a WAN networking environment, computer 842 typically includes a modem 898 or other means for establishing communications over the wide area network 894, such as the Internet. The modem 898, which may be internal or external, is connected to the system bus 848 via a serial port interface 868. In a networked environment, program modules depicted relative to the personal computer 842, or portions thereof, may be stored in the remote memory storage device. It will be appreciated that the network connections shown are exemplary and other means of establishing a communications link between the computers may be used.

Computer 842 typically includes at least some form of computer readable media. Computer readable media can be any available media that can be accessed

1 by computer 842. By way of example, and not limitation, computer readable  
2 media may comprise computer storage media and communication media.  
3 Computer storage media includes volatile and nonvolatile, removable and non-  
4 removable media implemented in any method or technology for storage of  
5 information such as computer readable instructions, data structures, program  
6 modules or other data. Computer storage media includes, but is not limited to,  
7 RAM, ROM, EEPROM, flash memory or other memory technology, CD-ROM,  
8 digital versatile disks (DVD) or other optical storage, magnetic cassettes, magnetic  
9 tape, magnetic disk storage or other magnetic storage devices, or any other media  
10 which can be used to store the desired information and which can be accessed by  
11 computer 842. Communication media typically embodies computer readable  
12 instructions, data structures, program modules or other data in a modulated data  
13 signal such as a carrier wave or other transport mechanism and includes any  
14 information delivery media. The term "modulated data signal" means a signal that  
15 has one or more of its characteristics set or changed in such a manner as to encode  
16 information in the signal. By way of example, and not limitation, communication  
17 media includes wired media such as wired network or direct-wired connection,  
18 and wireless media such as acoustic, RF, infrared and other wireless media.  
19 Combinations of any of the above should also be included within the scope of  
20 computer readable media.

21 The invention has been described in part in the general context of  
22 computer-executable instructions, such as program modules, executed by one or  
23 more computers or other devices. Generally, program modules include routines,  
24 programs, objects, components, data structures, etc. that perform particular tasks  
25 or implement particular abstract data types. Typically the functionality of the

1 program modules may be combined or distributed as desired in various  
2 embodiments.

3 For purposes of illustration, programs and other executable program  
4 components such as the operating system are illustrated herein as discrete blocks,  
5 although it is recognized that such programs and components reside at various  
6 times in different storage components of the computer, and are executed by the  
7 data processor(s) of the computer.

8 Although the description above uses language that is specific to structural  
9 features and/or methodological acts, it is to be understood that the invention  
10 defined in the appended claims is not limited to the specific features or acts  
11 described. Rather, the specific features and acts are disclosed as exemplary forms  
12 of implementing the invention.